WASHTENAW COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY - Founded December 17, 1857 FEBRUARY 1996

# WASHTENAW IMPRESSIONS

## KAREN'S COLUMN
## SPRINKLER SYSTEM COMPLETE, TELEPHONE SYSTEM INSTALLED, CALLS FORWARDED TO PRESIDENT

The tiny mechanical room at the Museum on Main Street is becoming the most handsomely outfitted room in the house. Now, in addition to the furnace, we have the impressive bit of plumbing shown here. It means that the fire protection sprinkler system is complete.

Jeff Pigeon and Ann Arbor Fire Protection were so helpful. They installed the system for a good price and then made a generous contribution. They will perform yearly inspections at no charge.

Many thanks to them for their involvement and help. We are lucky to be able to do much of this renovation with assistance from many friends. It really makes a difference.

Versile Fraleigh at Ann Arbor Snow Removal is again keeping the sidewalks cleared of snow this winter--another example of a very appreciated contribution by a civic-minded friend.

The underground telephone line to the house is complete from the pole to the basement. After a lot of fiddling around, Ameritech has the wire in and the telephone connected.

One problem we had: A day or two before they came to install the wire, there was an accident on Main Street. A car hit the telephone pole and snapped it off. No one was hurt, I understand. (A neighbor told me that he was afraid the pole was going to fall on the house!)

A new pole was immediately put in next to the old, making it now about 18 inches from the conduit. When I arrived the day the telephone company was to run our wire inside, I was quite puzzled to see that the conduit was no longer next to the telephone pole where it had been for months! Then I learned about the accident.

Pauline Walters donated a complete set of new telephones to the Historical Society for use at the Museum. One is now hooked up in the basement.

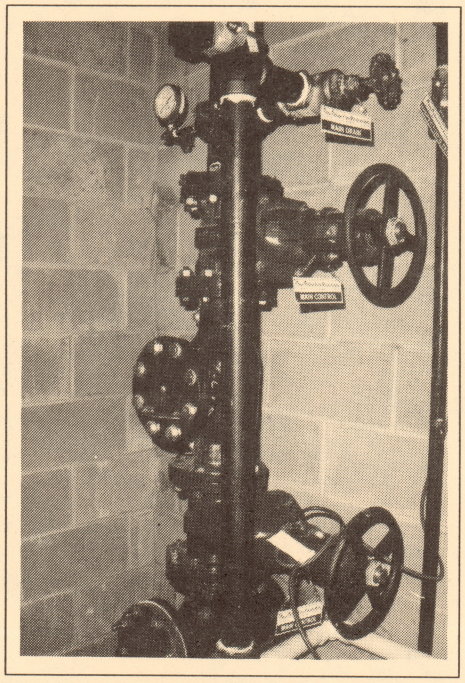

Photo by Karen O'Neal

WCHS calls to 662-9092 ring at the Museum but are forwarded to President Susan Wineberg's residence. It is great to have a phone for out-going calls. Thanks, Pauline.

Karen O'Neal, 665-2242

## LAURA MCNAB NAMED EDUCATION COORDINATOR: VOLUNTEER SPEAKERS ON HISTORICAL TOPICS SOUGHT

The WCHS Museum Operating Committee announces the appointment of Laura C. McNab of Belleville as the museum's education coordinator. Funds for the four-months position were granted by the Ann Arbor Area Community Foundation.

Ms. McNab holds a B.A. in public history from Western Michigan University and has been Museum Interpreter at Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village and a history intern for Tybee Island, Georgia, Historical Society. She is currently office manager for an Ann Arbor information management firm.

She was the first choice (from among many applicants) of a five-person committee chaired by WCHS President Susan Wineberg.

Goals for the position are to develop a detailed plan for close collaboration between the Museum on Main Street and Washtenaw County schools, colleges and universities.

The suggestions and aid of interested teachers, students and administrators in public, private and parochial schools, colleges and universities will be sought by Ms. McNab.

It is expected the plan for collaboration will include student visits to the museum, research projects, traveling exhibits of museum artifacts, classroom talks by WCHS members and recruitment of volunteers for museum activities.

Photo by Karen O'Neal
**Laura McNab**

To enable Ms. McNab to offer interested teachers several visiting speakers from among WCHS members, volunteers are encouraged to fill out and return the form on page 5 to indicate historical topic(s) they could present and preferred educational level.

## PROFESSOR HYDE TO TALK ABOUT HISTORIC BRIDGES

The uncertain future of one of the last three iron truss bridges in Washtenaw County gives added relevance to the February WCHS program about "Historic Highway Bridges in Michigan."

Charles K. Hyde, a professor at Wayne State University, will speak at the meeting at 2 p.m. Sunday, February 18. It will be held at the Washtenaw Intermediate School District Building at 1819 South Wagner Road near Scio Church Road.

Professor Hyde is the author of a 1993 book of the same title as his talk. He will discuss 19th and 20th century bridge designs as well as rehabilitation and preservation methods that have been used around the state.

The Bell Road bridge across the Huron River near Portage Lake is in danger of being torn down.

## SPRING FUND RAISER SET MAY 3 TO FEATURE FUN

WCHS's spring fund raiser is set Friday, May 3, at Cobblestone Farm Barn, featuring a catered historical May Day dinner and an evening of entertainment including vaudeville and the history of leisure pastimes from the Civil War through World War I.

If you have attic treasures related to leisure activities of the past that you would be willing to display that evening please call Debbie Hildebrandt, 663-2101, or Patricia Austin, 663-5281. They promise all items will be carefully protected.

Proceeds will go toward completion of the WCHS Museum on Main Street. The price and more details will be announced later. Please mark your calendar.

## WCHS HAS 48% OF KNAPP'S POINTS TOWARD NEW GOAL

WCHS now has 8,626 Bill Knapp's Restaurant points toward more acid free materials to safely store textiles. That is 48 percent of our new goal of 17,860 points.

As regular readers know, anyone who eats at Knapp's may request a yellow points slip from the cashier each time. One point is given for each dollar spent.

Please give or send to: Alice Ziegler, 537 Riverview Dr., Ann Arbor, MI 48104.

# STEPPING STONE A CLUE TO LOST HISTORY

In the late summer of 1980 some University students were refurbishing their fraternity house which had been recently acquired from another fraternity.

At the entrance was a stepping stone with the initials of the former fraternity carved on it. Upon picking it up they discovered a beautiful Hebrew engraving on the underside with the date 1853.

Little did they realize they were looking at evidence of a lost chapter of Ann Arbor history.

Helen Aminoff who researched that history shared the story with the November WCHS audience at Bentley Library.

"The students didn't know what to do with the stone so they took it over to Hillel Foundation and gave it to Rabbi William Rudolph, director. He didn't know what to do with it as he was getting ready to leave Ann Arbor.

"He gave it to Rabbi Kensky of Beth Israel Congregation. It remained in their basement for a number of months.

"We called the Michigan Jewish Historical Society and others. No one could tell me where this tombstone came from.

"We of the Ann Arbor Jewish Community were always of the opinion that the local Jewish community began in the early 1900s because at that time Mr. Zwerdling and the Lanskys arrived.

"Although there had been talk that but there was a Jewish community before and the Jews had been driven out there was never anything to substantiate it.

"At a board meeting after Beth Israel had its new building and the stone was still in the basement, Rabbi Kensky suggested that perhaps the marker should be placed in the garden as something of our heritage.

"One of the board members at the time, not realizing what he was saying, said 'Over my dead body.'

"Rabbi Kensky said to me, 'Helen, you like challenges. See what you can find out.' That started me."

(Helen is former treasurer, board member and administrator of Beth Israel Congregation. Currently she is business manager at the architectural office of David W. Osler Associates, Inc.)

**The original 1853 Weil family stone was returned to Forest Hill Cemetery after a several year interlude as a fraternity house stepping stone. Shown, left to right, are Amy Rosenberg of Kelsey Museum who helped clean the stone, Rabbi Allan D. Kensky of Beth Israel Congregation, Helen Aminoff who did the research and Jane Berliss, great-great-granddaughter of Solomon Weil.**

"Obviously, if there was a tombstone, there must have been a cemetery. If there was a cemetery, there should be something somewhere marking it.

"I was sent to Bentley Historical Library and spoke with Mary Jo Pugh, the archivist at the time. She suggested looking up old maps.

("Incidentally, when I went in for my interview with David Osler here was this map on the wall dated 1853 and here was this public cemetery and private cemetery, side by side. The map had been discovered in the attic of his father-in-law, Emil Lorch, and David had had it framed.)

"I decided to hone in on the private cemetery because Jews have their own separate burial ground.

"The next stop was the office of Fred Mayer, University of Michigan planner He sent me an abstract of a later map, 1870, that also showed the public and private cemeteries.

"With the help of Mayer, Harold Shapiro, then U-M president, and Rick Daane, U-M attorney, it was suggested that since the private cemetery actually worked out to be on the site of the current Rackham Building I should be allowed to look through the U-M engineering files.

"I went there and spoke to a young man named Michael Peal. He said it's not possible . I said here's the map, there's the cemetery in that location. Why are you telling me it's not possible?

"He said, 'because Michigan state law indicates one cannot build on property that has been a cemetery for at least 100 years. This took place in the 1850s. There were houses there before the Rackham Building.

"That law was initiated long after the cemetery had come and gone," she said.

They went through the files and they did find that prior to homes and the Rackham Building there was a burial ground there.

"The next stop was the Register of Deeds office. They have records of any purchase and sale of real estate in Washtenaw County.

"I never knew that looking through dusty old records would be fascinating but I sneezed my way through them and loved every minute of it.

"I started research in early 1981 and by the end of December 1981 I had put together a fascinating picture and I had, in fact, discovered that there had been a viable Jewish community in Ann Arbor dating from approximately 1843 to about the middle 1880s. The mainstay of that community was the

Weil family.

"We determined that some of the members of the family had gone on to Detroit and Chicago. We placed an advertisement in the *Jewish News* in Detroit and the *Chicago Sentinel* asking if anyone had information on the Weil family.

"It was picked up by the *Ann Arbor News*. They came and interviewed me. An article was published on a Sunday in January 1982.

"That very same weekend a young woman named Jane Berliss came here to continue her studies. It was the very first newspaper she picked up here.

"She opens it up and sees the name Solomon Weil--he was her great-great-grandfather . She called me up. She became an honorary member of my family. I became an honorary member of the Weil family.

"As a result of my contact with her we were able to get ahold of the family history. So, together with all the information I had gathered--I went through old Ann Arbor newspapers (the *Ann Arbor Argus* in those days)at Hatcher Library as well as city directories, deeds, abstracts, research at Bentley Library--I was able to piece together a fantastic story.

"The tombstone came from Forest Hill Cemetery. We must assume--and a lot of this is assumptions--that the students were out one night, reveling a little bit. This stone may have been loose. They picked it up and brought it back to their fraternity house.

"Actually they did us a favor because, had they not, we probably never would have known the beginnings of the Jewish community here. The wind and weather have pretty much obliterated the carvings on the stones that remained at Forest Hill. We did take rubbings from them and have them at Beth Israel.

"As a result of the research we have determined that the 'Private Cemetery' in Ann Arbor was, in fact, the first Jewish cemetery in the state of Michigan. As a result, we have a state historical marker on the Rackham Building site at the southwest corner of Huron and Fletcher.

"The story begins with Joseph Weil and his wife, Fannie. The family had their origins in Spain and the family

Courtesy of Helen Aminoff

**Forest Hill Cemetery view. Weil Family stone in center foreground.**

name was Levi. During the Spanish Inquisition they fled and changed the name to Weil, an anagram of Levi.

"They went to France and lived there for many years. When things became inhospitable for Jews in France they moved to what is today Czechoslovakia. It was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

""Emperor Franz Joseph ruled at the time. He welcomed them on one condition--that they send their children to public school as well as to Jewish schools.

"They had more freedom there but they were always trying to better themselves. They had visions of free air to breathe, free soil on which to stand and free opportunities to achieve in America.

"Why did they come to Ann Arbor? Washtenaw County was the fifth county in the state to be organized. It was known for wonderful fertile farming. There was a very fine German community, not Jewish, but they had similar cultural background and language.

"Joseph and his wife, Fannie , had seven sons. Two died in early childhood. Fannie passed away while the children were still young. Joseph remarried. His second wife was Sarah Stein. They had no children.

"The first of the five sons to come was the second son, Solomon, to try his hand at farming. He came with his wife and brother-in-law. He started out as a peddler. There is an 1845 deed to land they purchased in Pontiac, Michigan.

"The next brother, Moses, came, but left farming and opened up a trading shop.

"The third brother to come, Marcus, the youngest, joined Moses. He was the bookkeeper. Finally the other two brothers came. Two were farming and peddling.

"The next to youngest son, Jacob, was the most educated. He had studied and trained to be a rabbi. He spoke numerous languages, especially French. He apparently was a very good extemporaneous speaker and he was very pleasant and helpful. He joined the two brothers in the shop.

The other two by then had given up farming. They joined the three in the shop and it became J. (for Joseph) Weil and Brothers. They decided to follow a motto in the family--in unity there is strength. They stayed together.

The shop became known as the French Shoppe, the reason being Jacob would go out and exchange supplies for goods and skins and he spoke French to Canadians and Indians.

"In the 1850 census you see all the brothers. They all had arrived by 1848. Later they sent. for their folks. By the time the father arrived in 1860 he was 83 years old. He died by 1863.

"According to the family history they asked him to bring with them the sacred Torah scrolls. We have visions of them arriving in Detroit and taking a carriage to Ann Arbor, all the time bearing the sacred scrolls in their arms.

"The Weil brothers were a core Jewish community. In order to have formal prayer you need ten men--a 'minyan.' The first services were held in the homes of the brothers, originally 1848-50 in Lower Town where Leopold and Solomon Weil had a home.

"Later, when they each had their own home, they met at their homes on Washington and Huron Streets. Then, when the parents came with the sacred scrolls, the scrolls were held in the

parents home and services held there.

"So the first official synagogue in Ann Arbor was located at 300 West Washington Street.

"The 1850 census shows all the brothers and friends living under the same roof. In 1854-55 they opened a tannery. They decided that this was the way to go.--there was a need for it and the business thrived.

"By 1860 they were listed as tanners and each had his own home. There were other Jewish families too. The Fantles had a dry goods store somewhere on Main Street. Others too were here for a while and went on.

"The Weil family was active in all kinds of community activities. Jacob Weil served Ann Arbor as alderman from 1859-61. Because of his language capability he apparently had been offered the chair of romance languages at the U-M. He also was asked to run for mayor of Ann Arbor. At age 84, the father was a captain in the George Washington Day parade.

"According to an interview given by Jacob Weil, who by that time was in Newark, New Jersey, Jacob said there was a cemetery founded in 1848 or '49 but that the date and description on the deed were wrong.

"Moses Weil's wife passed away in 1853 and he was left with two young sons. At that time the tanning business was spreading out to Chicago and New York. Moses traveled a lot to Chicago and married his second wife there. By 1860 they had children of their own and they had moved to Chicago. It wasn't very long before the other brothers followed except Jacob.

"The great fire in Chicago in 1871 destroyed their tannery in Chicago but there was another branch that remained. Moses took seriously ill from smoke inhalation and died in 1880.

"The family still had holdings in Ann Arbor, so his last will and testament is filed in the Register of Deeds office. He left everything to his second wife and children by his second wife.

"He didn't leave anything to the first two sons, not because he loved them less but because he had spent large sums of money on their education and upbringing.

"At that time the oldest son was in Keokuk, Iowa, which at that time was the site of the first medical school in the United States."

"When the Weils all left in 1884, '85, '86 we can only surmise that they were the nucleus that held it together. The last of the families here were Sondheim and Fantle. They went off to Minnesota."

She cited an anti-Semitic advertisement that appeared on the front page of the *Argus* January 14, 1852 as evidence of an inhospitable climate.

## TEXT OF MARKER

At this site the first Jewish cemetery in Michigan was established in 1848-49. The Jews Society of Ann Arbor acquired burial rights to this land adjacent to what was then the public cemetery. Several years earlier immigrants from Germany and Austria had organized the first Jewish community in the state. The first religious services were held in the homes of the five Weil brothers in the vicinity of the family tannery, J. Weil and Brothers. Members of the Jewish community participated in all aspects of the city's life. Jacob Weil served Ann Arbor as alderman from 1859-61. By the 1880s this original Jewish community no longer existed.

"In 1900 the remains of those buried here were reinterred in Ann Arbor's Forest Hill Cemetery."

"It was headed 'OPPOSITION TO JEWS." It was run by a William O'Hara who ran a dry goods store and took great pains to point out that his goods were not 'of the eastern shop-worn slop work variety ,' obviously directed at his Jewish competitors.

"So there was anti-Semitism at the time but not enough to drive the Jews away," she commented. (President Susan Wineberg ran across the same ad while going through old papers and it was followed a week later with a rebuttal ad.)

"In response to the advertisements asking information about the Weil family that Mrs. Aminoff placed, a young man from Detroit called her and told her he would like her to talk to his grandmother, Lillian Smith.

"I went to interview her. First I asked her how a nice Jewish lady comes up with a name like Smith.

"She said her husband's family were coppersmiths and their name at the time was Kuperschmidt. When he came to Detroit he had to write his name on all the papers and it was too long he complained to his father. He wanted it shortened.

"The father apparently wrote the name Kuper on one piece of paper, 'Schmidt (Smith)'on the other, dropped them into a hat and the son picked one. That was how they became Smith. They could have become Kuper.

Lillian Smith was, in fact, a descendant of the Lansky family, some of whom live in Ann Arbor today. I'm sure you all remember Lansky's junk yard. They came to Ann Arbor in 1895 by way of Canada, and went first to Ohio.

"Why come to Ann Arbor? Lillian Smith, who was two years old when they came, said her family had heard it was a beautiful place to live. Then in a few years Mr. Zwerdling came and they were the roots of the present day Jewish community.

"The few stones that were in the Jewish Cemetery were transferred to Forest Hill cemetery about 1900 so they knew there had been a Jewish community.

"The cemetery itself was originally part of the Nowland farm. It came through a land grant. In 1832 Mr. Nowland donated part of the farm for a cemetery where Felch Park now is.

"In 1839, Mr. Morgan, a prominent Ann Arborite who owned a lot of land, bought the Nowland property.

"The deed indicated the Jews had purchased it in 1853. The deed was not recorded until 1870. There is a mistake in the description. It was actually in Block 1 south of Huron in Range 12 east but the deed described it as in Block 3 south.

"There is also a mistake in the year it was established. We have evidence of burials earlier than 1853. There were no more transactions until 1873.

"We believe as the Weils left they decided they had to protect the graves. It apparently had been a loose arrangement before so they obtained a deed and it was back dated.

"In 1899 there was a transaction with

a Mr. Samuel Langsdorf and Weil executors permitting moving of the graves from the Private Cemetery to Forest Hill for a consideration of $1, provided that they get an equal number of graves and the headstones be replaced at the site in Forest Hill.

"So the property was sold, houses were built on it. Eventually the U-M purchased the property, the houses were torn down and the Rackham Building built. That is basically the story.

"The Weil stone in Forest Hill lists Fannie, the mother of the five brothers, although she was actually buried in Europe, as well as the second wife, Sarah.

"In 1955 the Ann Arbor Jewish Community established its own cemetery in Arborcrest Memorial Park. There was talk about moving the stones from Forest Hill but we decided not to. Rabbi Kensky felt they had been disturbed enough.

"Until I did the research, Temple Beth El in Detroit had actually claimed to be the site of the first Jewish cemetery in Michigan.

"Leonard Simons, who is active in the historical society in Detroit, had said when they applied for a marker they were aware there was a cemetery in Ann Arbor but they thought it was a private one-family cemetery and they didn't consider it entitled.

"But when I did my research, I found the deed indicates the Weils acted on behalf of the Jews Society of Ann Arbor. On the basis of that we got our state historical marker."

"There were ten lots purchased in the Private Cemetery and ten burials were documented by going through the newspapers. In Forest Hill we can only document six burials.

"We can only assume either they got lost in the move or, as is well known in those days, they were stolen by the medical students to be used for medical purposes."

## 'WHAT IS IT?' GAME OFFERED SCHOOLS, GROUPS

WCHS offers a traveling exhibit of small artifacts, set up as a humorous "What is it? game to schools for children and another for adults. They are available for classes and meetings. Information: Arlene Schmid, 665-8773.

## HOW TO JOIN

Send name, address and phone number with check or money order payable to WCHS Membership, c/o Patty Creal, Treasurer, P.O. Box 3336, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-3336.

Annual dues are individual , $15; couple/family, $25; student or senior,(60+), $10; senior couple (one 60+), $19; business/association, $50; patron, $100. Information: 662-9092.

## CERTIFICATES OFFERED

Hand lettered certificates are offered free of charge, framed if desired, by WCHS to organizations, businesses, schools, etc. for milestone anniversaries. Information: 663-8826.

## ARTIFACTS TO DONATE?

Anyone wishing to donate an artifact to WCHS should contact Judy Chrisman, collections chair, at 769-7859 or by mail, 1809 Dexter Ave., Ann Arbor, MI 48103.

# CLASSROOM SPEAKERS NEEDED

Please see page 1 story about Laura McNab. If you would be willing to help by presenting classroom talks about any aspect of local, Michigan or American history please return form to:

**WCHS**
Post Office Box 3336
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-3336

***For more information call Laura at 313 / 699-8515***

Name: _____

Address: _____

Telephone: Day: _____ Evening: _____

Topic(s) _____

_____

_____

Preferred Level: ☐ Elementary ☐ Secondary ☐ College

## AROUND THE COUNTY

**Chelsea Historical Society:** 7:30 p.m. second Monday at Depot, North Main at Railroad.

**Dexter Society:** 8 p.m. first Thursday at Museum, 3443 Inverness.

**Manchester Society:** 7:30 p.m. third Tuesday at Blacksmith Shop, 324 East Main.

**Milan Society:** 7:30 p.m. third Wednesday at Hack House, 775 County Street. Programs featuring local businesses and local talent.

**Salem Society:** 7:30 p.m. fourth Thursday at Township Hall.

**Saline Society:** 7 p.m. third Wednesday at Senior Center, 7605 North Maple Road.

**Webster Society:** 7:45 p.m. second Monday. February 12 meeting at home of May Mast, 4580 Farrell Road, Dexter. Linda Chapman will talk about "The Underground Railroad in Washtenaw County."

**Ypsilanti Society:** Museum, 220 North Huron Street, open 2-4 p.m. Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays. Archives open 9 a.m.-noon Monday through Friday.

## FOUR-YEAR-OLD'S JAUNT HAIR RAISING FOR MOM

Reading about street cars in the October Impressions stirred memories for one reader of an adventure she had in Ann Arbor about 1918.

"I was rescued from the tracks on Main and Washington as a street car was coming. I had my doll buggy and was about four years old.

"I had walked from about 700 West Washington where we lived at the time, all by myself."

"Thank goodness there wasn't much traffic at that time," she writes. She also remembers when the street car crashed into the bank at Main and Huron.

She is Eleanor Dorstewitz of Paw Paw, Michigan, the daughter of Ruth Allmendinger Schmidt and granddaughter of David Allmendinger, the organ builder. She is working on the Allmendinger genealogy. "Most of what has been done is in the Bentley Library," she writes.

## TWO BLUNDERS NOTED IN WASHINGTON PAINTING

In the famous painting of Washington crossing the Delaware there are two blunders according to Albert Payson Terhune in an article in *Ladies' Home Journal* February 1930.

The American flag--stars and stripes--is floating over the boat. Washington crossed the Delaware in December 1776. The stars and stripes flag was not designed by Betsy Ross until June 1777.

"The second blunder is in depicting the drift ice rising from the water almost as high as the boat's gunwale. As about nine-tenths of an ice cake is below water, this would have implied that the Delaware River on Christmas night was choked with ice from fifteen to eighteen feet thick."

The author's great-grandfather, Abram Terhune, was in the boat. He is depicted at the bow oar nearest Washington.

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**Ann Arbor, MI**

**WASHTENAW COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

**'HISTORIC BRIDGES'**

**2:00 P.M. SUNDAY**
**FEBRUARY 18, 1996**

**WASHTENAW INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL DISTRICT**
**1819 SOUTH WAGNER ROAD**
**ANN ARBOR, MI**

Ypsilanti Museum
220 North Huron St
Ypsilanti MI 48197